

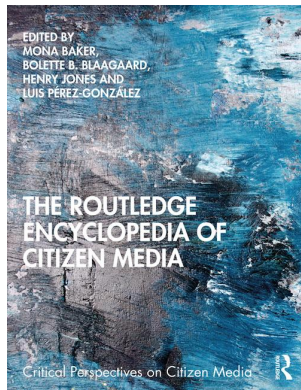
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Mona Baker, Bolette B. Blaagaard, Henry Jones, Luis Pérez-González

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Nina Grønlykke Mollerup

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ANTHROPOLOGY AND CITIZEN MEDIA

Nina Grønlykke Mollerup

This entry engages with anthropological contributions to the study of citizen media that are based on long-term, ethnographic fieldwork and immersive engagement. Citizen media have not formed a core focus for anthropological research to date. Rather, anthropological attention to citizen media has mainly grown out of studies of other topics. Thus, the exploration of citizen media does not yet constitute a coherent field of inquiry within the discipline. However, important insights on citizen media have been engendered by a wide range of different anthropological subdisciplines, including media anthropology (Barassi 2015a; Mollerup and Gaber 2015; Postill 2018), visual anthropology (Razsa 2014; Stone 2015; Westmoreland 2016) and indigenous anthropology (Fisher 2009; Ginsburg 1997, 2007; Ginsburg and Myers 2006).

At its most fundamental, anthropology is the study of humans as social beings. In Tim Ingold's words, the objective of anthropology "is to seek a generous, comparative but nevertheless critical understanding of human being and knowing in the one world we all inhabit" (2007:69). The methodological foundation of this discipline is fieldwork. While anthropological fieldwork has many different forms, few will dispute that time is a crucial aspect. Anthropologists often spend from at least a few months to sometimes many years in the field. Though our fields today are often more accessible than they once were, largely thanks to advances in transport and communications technologies, the core of anthropological fieldwork in many cases remains participant observation. Anthropologists seek to know by using themselves as tools, placing themselves next to the people whose lifeworlds they are interested in learning about, taking an active part in their lives. It is not unusual that anthropologists enter the field with the intention of studying something particular, but through sustained engagement with people over time, they frequently shift their attention to other aspects of people's lives, which turn out to be more significant. Thus, while anthropologists may intentionally position themselves in certain places, they cannot always anticipate or shape what will happen in these places while they are there. This has repercussions for the way anthropologists study citizen media, as they are often able to capture processes that evolve over time. Thus, anthropological accounts can provide an in-depth understanding of processes that enable and encourage the production of citizen media, even before the citizens concerned engage in media practices.

This entry seeks to explore the implications that these methodological foundations hold for the ways in which anthropologists study citizen media. It shows that through ethnographic methods and a mode of

analysis committed to richly detailed, textured and contextualized understandings of subjects' lifeworlds and cultural practices (Urla and Helepololei 2014), anthropology can draw greater attention to what are termed here quiet ruptures, that is, to everyday unspectacular changes in power relations which over time can be significant to larger processes of change. The entry next demonstrates that people involved in the production of citizen media are not always actively and deliberately aiming to do what their actions might eventually achieve, thus highlighting the emphasis anthropologists place on unplanned, unintended and unpredictable aspects of resistance. Finally, the entry seeks to illustrate the empirical depth and geographical spread of anthropological work on citizen media and consequently the discipline's capacity to provide thick description of and concrete engagement with such practices in a broad range of geographical and cultural settings.

Quiet ruptures: broadening understandings of citizen media

Through their temporal commitment and attention to the mundane, anthropological studies may often reveal a diversity of citizen media practices that would otherwise tend to pass unnoticed. An example of this is found in Tenhunen's (2018) ethnographic study of a village in rural India. Tenhunen originally went to India in 1999 to study women's political participation. Returning repeatedly to the village over the next fifteen years, Tenhunen came to explore how "the multifaceted use of mobile phones has influenced economic, political, and social relationships and how these new social constellations relate to culture, social change, and development" (2018:1). In particular, Tenhunen argues that the introduction of the cell phone has been part of a substantial reconfiguration of women's positions in their marital homes, a change which might be played out mainly by women speaking on the phone within the confines of their house, but which has implications not just for their relationships with their family, but also for the position of women in society. Essentially, "women benefit because phones have enabled the reconstruction of the meaning of the home and the outside world" (ibid.:19). Tenhunen's work thus serves to unsettle clearcut distinctions between private and public implicit in many definitions of citizen media by focusing on the ways in which acts in private spaces can serve to fundamentally challenge how social life can play out in public spaces. While Baker and Blaagaard (2016a) for example include the idea of acting in public space as a key element in their conceptualization of citizen media, Tenhunen shows how media technologies are co-constitutive of private and public space, and can be part of reconfiguring the tension between the two. By doing so, she also allows for an understanding of citizen media that does not fully reject the private sphere as a site of enactment.

Abu-Lughod (1986, 1990) similarly challenges the distinction between the private and the public in her classical study of the Awlad 'Ali Bedouins in Egypt, with whom she has carried out fieldwork over several years. Through continuous visits in which Abu-Lughod has lived as a guest and like a daughter of a Bedouin family, participating in everyday life and listening to women's storytelling in particular, she traces the transformation of power and resistance in this Bedouin society through several decades. In a society in which marriages are a communal affair, arranged between allies, friends and kin, Abu-Lughod has been part of discussions of potential marriages and heard older women's tales of their marriages and potential marriages. She ethnographically describes the ways young women resist unwanted marriages through practices which challenge neat distinctions between private and public. For instance, she describes how women sing taunting songs in private, female settings, while ensuring these are heard well beyond this setting, thus achieving a public ridiculing of an unwanted groom without compromising their modesty (1990:43–44). Abu-Lughod's participation in everyday life allows her to show such small performative acts as a significant form of resistance that reconfigures power relations, gender roles and access to spaces. Thus, through Abu-Lughod's ethnography, it becomes possible to recognize these women's practices as a form of citizen media.

Highlighting the messiness of human experience

As anthropologists are well aware, social life is messy. It is unpredictable and involves many unintended and contradictory events and activities. Rather than trying to impose order on the chaos of social life, anthropologists find the complexity informative. As Abu-Lughod shows, the complex workings of social power can be traced in the rich and sometimes contradictory details of resistance (1990:42). In seeking to interrogate contradictions and complexity, anthropologists are bound to continuously reconsider the categories they think with when entering the field. Often, seemingly clearcut categories become blurry once interrogated in their messy detail. This has implications for how citizen media practices are explored by anthropologists. Most notably, ethnographic research has forced a reconsideration of common understandings of what constitutes resistance. Armbrust's (1998) work serves to broaden this notion, questioning whether habits of media spectatorship can be seen as a form of resistance which can contribute to social transformation. Armbrust looks at moviegoing in downtown Cairo as "a secular ritual that can potentially enable kinds of social change not necessarily envisioned by the state, approved by normative society, or engineered through films themselves" (ibid.:413). He looks beyond the films and focuses on the types of encounters they enable. This point is particularly important in authoritarian settings where laughing at the same implicit parody of a ruler can create a feeling of shared resistance, even if this resistance is limited to a laugh. Thus, Armbrust's work compels us to think of spectatorship as an active site of production while he also points to the importance of unpredictability and the constant negotiations over meaning. Similarly, Mollerup and Gaber (2015) describe participation in illegal street screenings taking place during the Egyptian uprising between 2011 and 2013 as a revolutionary act. The first screenings were held in Tahrir Square during the summer sit-in in 2011 under the name of Tahrir Cinema. Later, screenings took place in neighbourhoods around the country, often organized by people from the neighbourhood under the name *'askar Kazeboon* (The military are liars). The original screenings did not have a more specific purpose than to show videos and raw footage of violent assaults on citizens at the hands of the army and the police to those in the square who had not seen them and to remind others of them. What was shown in these screenings was negotiated by participants in the screening and often a person from the crowd would volunteer a video, which would be transferred from the individual's phone to the makeshift screen by way of Bluetooth, a computer and a projector. These screenings explicitly contest distinctions between observing and acting by merging spectatorship with the occupation of public space. They thus work to position the act of witnessing as an act of defiance. Indeed, as Mollerup and Gaber's (2015:2906) ethnography showed, during the uprising in Egypt from 2011 to 2013, activists considered media less "a tool for the transmission of information" than "a tactic for producing new environments and collectivities", in many ways establishing the site of viewing as an active site of production. This insight echoes earlier calls from media anthropologists to radically rethink the divide between production and reception, and to pay attention to "the important but theoretically and empirically neglected area of distribution as a central process through which media helps constitute and reflect social difference, as power and status are signified through spatial and temporal dimensions of exhibition" (Ginsburg 2007:306). The participatory quality of street screenings in Egypt is of course also closely related to the participatory filming of revolutionary videos and filmmaking as a political action. Westmoreland (2016) has argued that the pervasive presence of cameras in the Egyptian uprising enabled a hypervisibility of the street in times of protest, which made image-making practices both threatening and powerful through their potential to cultivate new kinds of political subjectivity and collectivity.

The insight that Tahrir Cinema and *'askar Kazeboon* began with such vague and modest intentions points to how citizen media practices – in this case the sustained organization of street screenings – can often be initially unplanned and unpredictable yet come over time to have a very specific purpose and impact. Coleman's book, *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy: The many faces of Anonymous* (2014), further illustrates this tension in impressive empirical detail, based on her six years of extensive ethnographic research with

the hacktivist collective Anonymous. Coleman describes how the collective has developed from making strange, sarcastic videos with a dark and deviant style of humour that was hardly comprehensible to anyone outside the group to becoming “integral to some of the most compelling political struggles of our age” (ibid.:2), exposing wrongdoings and supporting resistance to oppression across the world through their digital activism. Coleman’s own prolonged participation in the movement was crucial for allowing her access to and engagement in the private discussions that shaped the development of the movement. This access enabled her to examine in particular detail the ways in which resistance can be unplanned, random and continually shifting, particularly in the context of collective action. This is an important insight for studies of citizen media more generally; though it can be easy to create a coherent historical narrative after the fact, when citizen media are interrogated as they unfold, they are often less determined and more ambiguous than they appear in retrospect.

Graffiti as acts of resistance

Ethnographic fieldwork often entails researchers moving through the same places as those their interlocutors move through, and this draws attention to things they did not imagine to be of importance before entering the field. The growing body of anthropological scholarship on graffiti, mainly written by anthropologists who did not know they were going to study graffiti until they realized they were already doing so, exemplifies this. Graffiti is particularly interesting for the way it simultaneously records and intervenes in often very unequal relationships of power. Like political demonstrations, graffiti occupies spaces and expresses its maker’s existence (Khosravi 2013). Through fieldwork, anthropologists insert themselves into these spaces and participate in situations when and where graffiti is made, remade, read and erased; moreover, like the people under study, the paths and attention of researchers are directed by the graffiti they see. Indeed, in her analysis of the cultural landscape of the occupied West Bank during the 1980s and 90s, Peteet (1996:139) suggests a method for reading “the battle of the walls much the way an archaeologist reads stratigraphy – layer by layer – each layer of paint indicating a partial and temporary victory in an ongoing battle”. She asserts that many examples of graffiti in the Occupied Palestinian Territories before the turn of the millennium did not merely send messages or signify defiance, but rather that “their mere appearance gave rise to arenas of contest in which they were a vehicle or agent of power” (ibid.:140). Peteet’s engagement was not only with the walls, but also with the people who moved around them. She recounts a young woman from Ramallah telling her, “when I wake in the morning and see new graffiti I know that resistance continues. It tells me that people are risking their lives and that they live right here in this neighbourhood” (ibid.:151). What Peteet’s study illustrates, therefore, through her engagement with people to whom the graffiti was significant, is that the content of the graffiti was less significant than the resistance it enabled.

Recognizing that graffiti records domination also brings significance to how city walls can tell an ongoing story of changing political situations. The walls of Cairo illustrate this point very clearly. Before the uprising broke out in Egypt in 2011, explicitly political graffiti was sparse, but walls in the country spoke of more mundane issues through graffiti with advertisements for mechanics or romantic declarations (Schielke and Winegar 2012). Schielke and Winegar (2012) additionally point to the importance of the emplacement of particular pieces of graffiti, for instance when the walls surrounding the presidential palace became a specific site to challenge political legitimacy during the years of the uprising when political graffiti was widespread. They hold that

the new writings after 2011 are a testament to rich and interrelated modes of verbal and visual expression in Egypt, of the links between politics, love, death and the struggle to make a living, of the contests in many aspects of Egyptians’ personal and social lives.

ibid.

Similarly, through repeated returns to Cairo during the military dictatorship, the revolutionary uprising and the subsequent restoration of the military dictatorship, Mollerup (2015) found that the walls around the city told the strongest tale of the political climate at a given time. During the years of the uprising, new writings significantly changed the visual experience of public space in Egypt as people moving through it were constantly reminded of – and implicated in – the ongoing political struggles. As the Egyptian military started once again to succeed in repressing opposition, this time with renewed severity, the walls turned eerily silent. At one point, in 2015, a single piece of graffiti bravely decried, “your voice is not on this wall” (Mollerup 2015:66; my translation), serving as a sorely clear reminder of the many activists and journalists who were killed, imprisoned, beaten, tortured and threatened for making their voices heard.

Indigenous media and the right to be recognized

Anthropology has grown out of colonialism and was concerned at first with helping “classify non-European humanity in ways that would be consistent with Europe’s story of triumph as ‘progress’” (Asad 1994:314). With the breadth of European expansion, this means that anthropology has historically engaged with people from very diverse geographical and cultural backgrounds mainly outside of Europe. Since the 1960s, this geographical and cultural focus has been exchanged for a fundamental interest in human being and knowing irrespective of people’s position in relation to colonial power structures. Certain regions and themes dealt with in anthropology do, however, continue to engender greater anthropological interest, including the struggles of colonized peoples to be recognized as political subjects. Yet, the violent history of the field has led anthropologists to be particularly aware of how they can create knowledge with people, rather than merely about people, and how this knowledge is made to matter to them. One strand of anthropology that has focused on citizen media is that which deals with the rights and cultural identities of indigenous groups, and which also engages in work to support these rights, including language rights (Urla 2012), the rights of incarcerated Aboriginal people (Fisher 2009) and civil rights (Budka 2015). Ginsburg (1997, 2007) places indigenous activist engagements with media in direct relation to media “being produced by a variety of other minoritized subjects who have become involved in creating their own representational framework as a counter to dominant systems” (Ginsburg 2007:303). This framework, she points out, includes work being done by people with AIDS (Juhasz 1995), Palestinians in Israel’s occupied territories (Kuttab 1993) and Tibetan Buddhist activists (McLagan 1996). Ginsburg (1997, 2007) approaches the creative and self-conscious process of objectification through this media production as a form of cultural activism, drawing on George E. Marcus’ (1996:6) term the activist imaginary, in which film and video are used to “pursue traditional goals of broad-based social change through a politics of identity and representation”. Such practices also raise issues about “citizenship and the shape of public spheres within the frame and terms of traditional discourse on polity and civil society” (ibid.). Ginsburg (1997) maintains that the perspectives of Aboriginal activists are tied to the struggle for land and religious rights, which characterizes the concerns of First Nations or indigenous social movements in particular. She argues that

products of indigenous expressive culture are part of self-conscious efforts to sustain and transform culture in aboriginal communities, an activity that is linked to indigenous efforts for rights to self-representation, governance, and cultural autonomy after centuries of colonial assimilationist policies by surrounding states.

ibid.:119

These efforts, she holds, are not so much against the state, but rather express a desire to “be recognized and granted entitlements and reparations within the terms of the dominant legal code” (ibid.:120). The work of filmmakers and other cultural activists, then, is part of changing the cultural landscape of the Australian continent, which is bound by

the paradox of the persistence, growth, and increasing circulation of such work in Indigenous cultural production, despite the alarming political turn against gains made by Indigenous Australians over the last decade, not only by right-wing politicians but intellectuals as well.

Ginsburg and Myers 2006:95

In their joint work, Ginsburg and Myers (ibid.:97) explore how the work of indigenous filmmakers and cultural activists creates possibilities for Aboriginal futures outside the defining limits of law and policy by tracking “a history of Indigenous futures in Australia, over a period in which Indigenous people have slowly but surely been re-imagining what they might be”. Ginsburg and Myers’ work is not merely about this work to create futures. Through their sustained and concrete engagement with these communities, for instance in co-creating cultural productions, they are also part of the work to create these potential futures.

Future directions

As noted in the introduction to this entry, anthropological attention to citizen media has largely developed out of research concentrating on a wide range of other topics. While these disparate studies will surely continue to engender important insights into citizen media, it would nevertheless be productive in future work for anthropologists to concentrate more directly on practices of citizen media, and to bring these diverse perspectives more explicitly into conversation. With its non-media centric approach to understanding citizen media practices and its emphasis on how they are enacted by and make sense to people, anthropology has much to offer to this emerging area of interdisciplinary investigation. In particular, through its commitment to long-term and concrete engagement with communities in a broad range of geographical and cultural settings, anthropology can help unpack global connections and further our understanding of ways in which citizen media in different places can help unsettle power structures well beyond local contexts.

See also: documentary filmmaking; graffiti and street art; hacking and hacktivism; public sphere

Recommended reading

Barassi, V. (2015) *Activism on the Web: Everyday struggles against digital capitalism*, New York and London: Routledge.

This book draws on anthropological research among three very different political groups in the UK, Italy and Spain to examine the everyday tensions that political activists face as they come to terms with the increasingly commercialized nature of web technologies. It makes an important contribution to our theorization of the digital aspects of citizen media by suggesting that if we want to understand connections between digital and political participation, we should not focus merely on disruption and novelty.

Coleman, G. (2014) *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy: The many faces of Anonymous*, London: Verso.

This seminal work on Anonymous is based on extensive anthropological fieldwork with the worldwide movement. The book captures the movement’s development from an obscure group of reckless geeks to an agenda-setting, government-disrupting political movement.

Tenhunen, S. (2018) *A Village Goes Mobile: Telephony, mediation, and social change in rural India*, New York: Oxford University Press.

This book is grounded in extensive ethnography carried out between 1999 and 2013. Through repeated returns to an Indian village, Tenhunen captures subtle yet significant changes in social relationships and in the ways in which these changes are entangled with the introduction of the mobile phone, allowing for an analysis which connects the private and the political.